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AUTHOR	Taff, Alice
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the progress of a group of adults who have been connecting by telephone to learn to speak Deg Xinag, the language of the Deg Hit'an (Ingalik Athabaskan). The Deg Hit'an are the westernmost of the Athabaskan peoples, living near the confluence of the Yukon and Innoko Rivers in Alaska. Since Deg Xinag speakers, all elders, number fewer than 20, and the learners, young adults, are spread among sites too distant to allow them to meet, a one-credit distance education class was organized under the authority of the University of Alaska, Interior Campus--Mcgrath Center. After a first semester fraught with scheduling difficulties and poor phone connections, the second semester class of four speakers and eight learners met once a week for 1 hour with 2 hours of homework. Student-selected goals included learning to perceive and produce the sounds of the language in the context of common expressions and being able to use some expressions in daily routines. Class activities included listening to the speakers converse, speakers modeling the words followed by round-table repetition by learners, and conversation. One of the learners, the teacher-of-record, compiled phrase lists from the conversations and faxed them to students. Each student also completed an independent project, such as translating a children's book or creating a song. In addition to permitting a language learning situation that otherwise could not exist, telephone conferencing created valuable opportunities to use the language in real-life activities. (Author/SV)

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Teaching Indigenous Languages

Learning Ancestral Languages by Telephone: Creating Situations for Language Use

Alice Taff

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Learning Ancestral Languages by Telephone: Creating Situations for Language Use

Alice Taff

This is a progress report on a group of adults who have been connecting by phone to learn to speak Deg Xinag, the language of the Deg Hit'an (Ingalik Athabaskan). The Deg Hit'an are the westernmost of the Athabaskan peoples, living near the confluence of the Yukon and Innoko Rivers in Western Central Alaska. Since the number of Deg Xinag speakers, all elders, is less than twenty and the learners, young adults, are spread amongst sites too distant to make it feasible to get together face-to-face, we organized a one-credit distance delivery class under the authority of the University of Alaska, Interior Campus—McGrath Genter. This paper describes the effort of a small language community to preserve its language orally, notes some of the broader implications to be drawn from our experience, and tells a story or two.

We have finished our second semester of teaching Deg Xinag by phone, meeting with fluent speakers for an hour once a week by audioconference. Our speakers provide us with phrases we don't yet know and guide us in pronouncing Deg Xinag. We call in from Anvik, Shageluk, McGrath, Fairbanks, and Anchorage in Alaska and Seattle, Washington.

To set up the class, administrators at the McGrath campus advertised in relevant communities, calling the schools and tribal offices. Interested students registered by fax. Taking students' preferred meeting times into consideration, a weekly meeting schedule was set up with the Alaska Teleconferencing Network. This costs the University $18 per site. The student cost is $70 for this one credit, but University of Alaska funding for Alaska Native Languages subsidized the course, reducing the cost to $25.

Ideally, all class members in each community got to a central location and called the toll-free number using audioconference convening equipment, a speaker box with microphones attached that is hooked to a phone jack. Alternatively, participants at one site used multiple handsets on one line in a household. We found that speaker phones did not work well since their signal turns off and on during the speech stream. A good signal is very important since we are working with a language that relies heavily on its fifty consonants for a high percentage of its speech signal and some of the voiceless sounds such as tth and tl did not come through very clearly.

We started out our first semester with one speaker and learners in four sites. The first week we could hardly hear each other because the phone connection was so bad and we were not used to putting up with it. The next day our

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speaker slipped on the ice outside her house, broke her ankle, was taken to the hospital, and was unavailable for the rest of the semester. The four learners in her village dropped the course owing to other crises there. Just before we were to be shut down for low enrollment, two more speakers stepped in to help out so we were able to persevere. One met in Fairbanks with students calling in from there, and the other met in Shageluk with those students. Students in these locations had the advantage of contact with the speakers; they could really hear all the sounds of the language and get visual cues for pronunciation.

The first semester we met twice a week for an hour and a half each session, but this proved difficult. Listening to a poor phone signal in a language we did not understand for ninety minutes was a strain. In addition, people's schedules were too crowded to enable them to successfully meet three hours together and work on homework six more hours per week. The second semester we met once a week for a one hour class with two hours of homework per week, which worked out better. The second semester the class was made up of four speakers working with eight learners.

Class activities

We started out by setting realistic individual language learning goals, taking into account the actual time each person was able to devote to study. Students selected as their goals learning to perceive and produce the sounds of the language in the context of common expressions and being able to use some expressions in their daily routine.

Basing our activities on the principle that children learn to talk without overt teaching of grammar and following the advice of another Athabaskan teacher, we limited our discussion of grammar. We did not learn lists of words, but concentrated instead on practicing whole phrases and sentences and using them in conversations. In other words, we chose to spend our time talking instead of analyzing how to talk or memorizing someone else's analysis.

Each week we spent some time listening to our speakers converse so we had a chance to hear real discourse taking place. After some weeks, we found that we began to understand some of what our speakers were saying to each other. We practiced saying common conversational expressions following the model of our fluent speakers. We have a literacy manual (Jerue, Maillelle, Hargus & Taff, 1993) with a list of common expressions that we used extensively the first semester to "jump-start" us. We used what we called a "round table" format for this with everyone taking a turn at saying the word or phrase:

speaker 1	*ade'*	hello
learner 1	*ade'*	
speaker 2	*ade'*	
learner 2	*ade'*	
speaker 1	*ade'*	
learner 3	*ade'*	
speaker 2	*ade'*	

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learner 4 *ade'*
And so on.

Having a number of speakers to model the words was especially valuable to us since this gave us the opportunity to hear a range of possibilities for each utterance.

Learners could "pass up" their turn if they chose, but they seldom did. Our language learning heroes are babies since they acquire language effortlessly so we tried to follow their example and give ourselves plenty of time to listen to expert speakers and treat our mispronunciations as acceptable babbling practice, remembering that babies spend up to a year or so at this. Trying to develop an environment in which learners were not afraid to make mistakes, we told the newest members of our class the second semester that they were our babies. We said, in effect, "You are very important to us, and we don't expect you to be perfect. Just keep trying." Once we were practicing a form for 'no' that we had found difficult to remember and could not write even though it is short and had seemed simple enough the previous week (It could be described as a long mid lax front vowel with some nasalization that has an intonation peak followed by a glottal stop in its middle, similar to but not quite the same as an American English 'uh, uh'). We had each taken our turn saying, "Ehenh'eh," when we heard a tiny voice on the line chime in "Ehenh'eh," right on cue. It was the toddler of one of the class members, a real baby, listening and learning. We all laughed in delight. Laughter set this word firmly in our memories. Now we do not need to write it to remember it. A baby helped us learn.

When we had trouble repeating we asked *"Che yixudz didene."* 'Please say it again.' The round table repetition also helped clarify sounds that were cut off as a result of imperfect phone connections. After many repeats, we could piece together all the words. These repetition drills served as warm-up exercises as we shifted from English to working with Deg Xinag. For warm-ups the second semester, we checked on forms from previous sessions that we were not sure of.

After these round table warm-ups, we opened the 'floor' for conversation, *"Deg hiqi xinadra tidlgisr"* (Let's talk Deg Xinag), asking our speakers for translations so we could say the things we wanted to say to each other like:

Ndadz dengit'a?	How are you?
Xughe' iynatlnik.	I'm tired.
Ngegh ndadz dixet'a?	What's the weather like?
Xidetr'iyh.	It's windy.
Ngididhistth'iggi ts'in'.	I can't hear you.

We used a few old phrases and a few new ones every week. By the end of our hour, we were usually talking hard and did not want to hang up, but we would say,

Agide yixudz.	That's all.
Ixudzan.	Good-bye.
Xisrigidisddhinh.	I thank you.

Then we frequently dialed each other so we could continue the conversation.

Most class members took notes during class but had very little practice with the writing system. I, as the teacher-of-record, who was really one of the learners, summarized each class afterward in writing, included the new phrases with their translations, checked spellings with the available resources, then faxed this class summary to all students each week with an agenda for the next meeting. Every few weeks I compiled all the phrases into a list with translations, alphabetized the list for both Deg Xinag and English, and faxed this to students. We used these phrase lists to study from and to refer to during class to help us remember a phrase we had used before.

Care with spelling was only important for us to make sure that we did not miss any important sounds in the words. The relatively new writing system represents each sound with a particular letter combination so spelling can help with pronunciation. However, we were not concentrating on learning to write 'correctly.' We did not want to cripple the leaning process with too much writing. A heavy dependence on writing can result in learners needing to visualize a word mentally in written form when they hear it before they can convert its sound to meaning. When they want to talk, writing dependent learners may need to 'write' and 'read' their utterances mentally before they can speak. We made speaking our primary activity and kept writing in the background. We did have a few, brief discussions of grammar when we observed patterns arising in our phrases lists, for example, the order of subjects, objects, and verbs.

The first semester we concluded by having students memorize a conversation from Jerue et al. (1993) and perform it with a partner during the last class. The rationale for this was that students would be able to retain some large chunks of language to call on from memory.

Second semester, each student chose an independent project. There was a wide variety of projects since there was a wide range of both experience with the language and personal interest in language use. Some of the projects were:

- Translation of a children's book from a sister language into Deg Xinag and publication of the book.
- Organizing some of the phrases we used in the class into coherent conversations in written form with audio recordings for future learners.
- Making a list of twenty phrases to learn.
- Creating and taping a song to sing with children.

The student with the song project had wanted for some time to find a Deg Xinag song she could sing with her child. When we brought this up during a class, one of our speakers said, "Well we can just make one up right now," and

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she proceeded to do so. Our speaker reminded us that we are learning a living language, and we do not have to search history to find a song; we can create new songs in Deg Xinag whenever we want.

In addition to our speakers, the literacy manual *Deg Xinag Dindlidik* (Jerue et al., 1993) mentioned above, class summary faxes, and class phrase lists, we checked words and phrases with a computerized stem list dictionary (Kari et al., in progress), a topical dictionary, *Deg Xinag Noun Dictionary* (Kari, 1978), and a computerized language learning program that focuses on the verb system, *Deg Xinag axa Nixodhił Ts'in'* (Taff, 1994).

Evaluation

At the end of the first semester, we reviewed our course goals to evaluate progress. All students reported that they felt they had learned during the class. Some were using phrases with their children and with others in their villages, and some could pick out words when they had a chance to hear Deg Xinag.

At the end of our second semester, we find ourselves gaining confidence in our improved pronunciation. We can extend greetings to each other and converse about the weather, inquire about and tell each other how we were feeling, and tell what we would like to eat (The class met right at suppertime). We are conversing about real concerns in our daily lives.

Our most important resource is our speakers. Without them we could certainly not be conducting the kind of learning experience where we can ask, "How do I say...?" Also invaluable is the telephone system that links us together; we could not do without it, but that doesn't stop us from complaining that it doesn't work perfectly! Our supportive university administrators have enabled us to persist in this effort.

The teaching material we have relied on most heavily is our literacy manual (Jerue et al., 1993), but we have learned that we could probably conduct the class without any materials. We see that we are developing materials as we go along by asking how to say what we want to say and recording these sentences in our minds and on our tongues as well as on paper. We have discussed possible ways to document all of our Deg Xinag conversations in audio and writing for future users.

Compared to a language learning environment where we have speakers in a community able to interact with us face-to-face, learning over the telephone is a terrible situation. We cannot participate in physical activities. We cannot see the faces, gestures, and other body language of our speakers. We have no visual cues about the meaning of the speech we are hearing and have to depend on translations into English to establish meaning for Deg Xinag utterances. But compared to no language learning situation, the telephone class experience is wonderful. It allows us the only opportunity most of us have to listen to and talk with a group of fluent speakers.

We recommend this distance delivery method as part of a larger language learning program or as a way of getting such a program started. Distance deliv-

ery language learning could be an effective method for follow-up after an intensive face-to-face class when participants disperse.

Conclusion

During our second semester, with inspiration drawn from the Fourth Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium, we realized that we did more than conduct a language class; we created a situation in which we speak Deg Xinag. In her discussion of Australian language revitalization, Jolly (1995) points out that at the core of language revival efforts is the need for communities to establish situations for language use. The value of this class as an opportunity to learn Deg Xinag is probably overshadowed by the value of the class as an opportunity to use Deg Xinag. Reiterated throughout this conference has been the theme that communities faced with the loss of their ancestral language "for the first time," as remarked by keynote speaker Dick Littlebear, need to consciously create situations in which the language is used for real life activities. Talking on the phone is a real life activity.

We are speaking Deg Xinag, not fluently and not often enough but more than we would without our class. Our disadvantages include our separation from each other, less than perfect audio connections, and lack of time to commit to language learning. Our advantages are our desire to use Deg Xinag, our kindly, tolerant speakers, the telephone system, our supportive university, and our written resources.

The broader implication of our small effort is to recognize and encourage possible situations for language use without waiting for outside experts to analyze the language and develop materials. A simple solution to maintaining a spoken language is to speak it. The hard part, for many reasons addressed elsewhere, is getting ourselves to try.

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